

INTRODUCTION TO A WALKING TOUR OF CIVIL WAR WOODSTOCK

Howard Coffin

A Massachusetts visitor wrote the following description of Woodstock village in the fall of 1862:

“The village is situated in the valley of the Otta Quechee, a small bright river spanned at this point by three bridges...The valley is enclosed by high purple hills covered with verdure. It has as pretty a village, and is surrounded by as pleasant a landscape, as ever sprang from the green bosom of a country dell, and is one of the most beautiful gems in our American Switzerland. Woodstock is the shire-town of one of the wealthiest counties of the state, and upon its broad avenues are thickly clustered the public buildings of the county and town, with the white cottages of the inhabitants; the latter peeping out from the green mantel of the woodbine, climbing rose, and honeysuckle, with little plats in front embroidered with flowers. The public buildings are deeply embowered among the foliage of trees, affording an agreeable contrast of light and shade, and by their varying hues, giving to the scenery an appearance which is exceedingly pleasant. The American elm, towering up with its luxuriant arms and noble drapery, and the graceful silver maple, both in their native soil, cast their grateful shade over the streets, and add essentially to the rural beauty of the place.”

The description, a good one, speaks of Woodstock in the second year of the American Civil War. The town was, in point of fact, as much a part of Civil War America as Richmond, Manassas, Chattanooga, and Antietam. The fact that the musketry and cannonading did not come close to this northern New England village speaks volumes about the war and its outcome. From this quiet community in the Green Mountains of Vermont men went forth to fight and kill Confederates at the war's famous places, at Chancellorsville, Gettysburg and Cold Harbor. They went forth just as Confederates lads left their Clarksville, Tennessee, Fairfax, Virginia, and Vicksburg, Mississippi homes to kill Union lads at Seven Pines, Spotsylvania Court House and Antietam. Broken and lifeless bodies came back to quiet Woodstock in the Green Mountain State as they returned to towns in the Great Smokies, hamlets along the Mississippi bayous, to the tidewater cities that knew the blast and boom of actual combat. The war touched Woodstock in very profound ways, and Woodstock's contribution to the Union armies was considerable. And the local lads, if they chose, could tell tales of the horror of war nearly equal to those told by any boys from Aldie, Virginia, and Savannah, Georgia. But the Woodstock boys' stories would not have included the burning of their home town, the destruction of the home place, the burning of crops that fed the family and the armies, the destruction of a forge that made iron for cannons and for the wheel rims of farm wagons.

Still, the young men of Woodstock who donned the Union blue knew war and no Woodstock soldiers had a harder time than those in Company C of the 6th Vermont Regiment, one of five regiments that made up the famed 1st Vermont Brigade. Of the 59 Woodstock men who joined, 25 became casualties. Nine Woodstock men of Company C were shot in the Wilderness, where Vermont lost 1,234 men in two days of fighting. Among them was Captain George Randall, who bled to death after being hit by Minie balls in both legs. After the war the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) post here was named for him. Other Company C members fell at Spotsylvania Court House, Cold Harbor, Third Winchester and Cedar Creek. Private Henry Jones died in the infamous Rebel prison at Andersonville, Georgia. Also, several Woodstock lads serving in the 54th Massachusetts Regiment saw combat, particularly in the bloody little fight at Oulustee, Florida, in February 1864.

The town of 3,062 people sent 284 men to war. Thirty-nine died. Those totals are about average for a Vermont town. Throughout the state, from 1861 to 1865, about one in nine Vermonters served and about one in seven of them perished. But Woodstock is a remarkable place to examine the home front during the Civil War. Woodstock today is filled with structures that stood during the 1860s. It retains much of the look of the Civil War era, and it has perhaps the richest, and most important, Civil War history of any town in Vermont. There may be no better place in the Northern states to discover the home front history of the time of the Rebellion. The size of the village is nicely suited to a walking tour and one encounters the past at every turn. One fact that will strike you walking its old tree-shaded streets is the peacefulness of the place. Woodstock generally retained a peaceful appearance throughout the war. Oh yes, the local militia drilled in the streets at times throughout the war. There were celebrations on the arrival and departure for war of local companies. Hear that same visitor who described the village talk of the departing of recruits for the war zone in the fall of 1862:

"The voice of the country in her hour of peril had reached these peaceful borders, and to the call,

"Come forth all ye brave for your country now--"

"The people of the town and vicinity were responding. My visit was on a beautiful autumn day, and martial forms led by bands of music were seen parading the streets; the inspiring, as well as many discordant sounds of war now broke the usual quiet of the village, and two companies of the stalwart sons of the Green Mountains, formed in front of one of the village inns, were bidding adieu to wives, mothers, sisters, relations, and friends, preparatory to their departure to join the ranks of the army of the Union, and as the chorus of song:

"We are coming, Father Abraham,

"Three hundred thousand more,"

"Which was sung from the balcony by the celebrated Barker family, echoed back from the mountains, the scene was deeply impressive."

War was raging, but it was 500 and more miles away. Dead and wounded soldiers were coming home throughout the conflict. Many soldier funerals were held in the village churches, including one for a young man killed fighting off Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg. Yet life went on, almost uninterrupted, with the home folks doing their best to make up for

the absence of most of the town's able-bodied young men. Dances and entertainments took place at the Town Hall on a regular basis. The horses on display at the county fair, even in 1864, were said to have been "of good stock." One recalls the words of the Civil War historian Shelby Foote, uttered during Ken Burns's remarkable television series "The Civil War." He said, "Sometime it seems that the North fought that war with one hand tied behind its back."

But while village life remained unchanged, at least on the surface, war activity was taking place in Woodstock at a pace unmatched by any other location in Vermont. Upstairs above a block of stores fronting on the village square, Adjutant General Peter Washburn, a Woodstock lawyer who had led troops into combat in the war's first battle, worked as Vermont's official administrator of the war. The paperwork of war was accomplished in his offices where a staff of clerks assisted in issuing the orders, notices, requisitions, death notices, calls for troops, all the administering of the Vermont war effort. It was a major task and it brought to Woodstock throughout the war years most of Vermont's important war figures. And Washburn's duties on several occasions took him to Washington where he met the commander in chief, President Lincoln, who he resembled.

Woodstock is also remarkable because several major figures of the Civil War era lived in the village, or had important Woodstock connections. United States Senator Jacob Collamer, one of the moving forces in the wartime Senate, made his home in Woodstock when not in Washington. The Marsh family lived in Woodstock and George Perkins Marsh, who grew up here, served as Minister to Italy during the war, working effectively to keep the European nations out of the war on the Confederate side. Frederick Billings had gone from Woodstock before the war to make his fortune in California and labored to keep California in the Union, and to organize the famed Sanitary Commission, that cared for sick and wounded Union soldiers.

Also, Civil War Woodstock had a very sizeable Black population, with many families living on South Street in the 1860s. Twelve black men from Woodstock enlisted in the famed 54th Massachusetts Regiment, the first black regiment to see combat. Eight members of the 54th are buried in Woodstock's remarkable River Street Cemetery, where Collamer and Washburn, and the first Vermont lad to die from hostile fire, also rest. To Woodstock in 1774 had come the Powers family, bringing with them a slave, Christopher Molbone. Molbone and all other blacks in Vermont, if they were still in servitude, became free men in 1777 when the Republic of Vermont adopted the first constitution in the United States to outlaw slavery. A son of the Powers family, Hiram, became a world-famous sculptor, and his best known work, the Greek Slave, became a symbol of freedom before the Civil War, and was briefly displayed in Woodstock in 1850. Vermont made a mighty contribution to the cause of the Union and the defeat of slavery, with Vermont regiments playing key roles on such major battlefields as Gettysburg, the Wilderness, Cedar Creek and Petersburg. Vermont farm boys often entered the war with racist attitudes toward Blacks; but letters home from the 2nd Vermont Regiment cast considerable light on that racism, and the maturing of their views.

The National Park Service has recently made a commitment to presenting a broader view of the Civil War. The aim of this tour is to show visitors to our parks far more of the Civil War era than the battles. Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park, in partnership with the Billings Farm & Museum, will be the first location associated with the National Park System to interpret the home front, adding to

the experiences offered by such famed battlefield parks as Gettysburg, Shiloh, Harpers Ferry and Vicksburg.

Howard Coffin, who grew up in Woodstock and who has written three books on the Civil War, *Full Duty: Vermonters in the Civil War*; *Nine Months to Gettysburg: Standards Vermonters and the Repulse of Pickett's Charge*; and *The Battered Stars: One State's Civil War Ordeal During Grant's Overland Campaign*, is serving as principle advisor to the National Park Service on the project.